

Obituary

Sheila Bingham (1947–2009)

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The death of Sheila Rodwell (known professionally as Sheila Bingham) on 16 June 2009 came as sad news to all who knew her. Sheila was a world leader in many areas of nutrition research including diet and cancer, dietary assessment, and the development of biomarkers and measurement error. It was her enthusiasm and capacity to integrate a range of disciplines within nutrition research that allowed her to maintain a leading role for the past 30 years. She conducted carefully controlled metabolic studies in small numbers of volunteers to further understand mechanisms of action, but also led large prospective population-based studies to understand the importance of nutrition at a population level. It was this multi-disciplinary approach that led to some of her key research findings. For example, she furthered our understanding of the importance of dietary fibre and meat in the development of colorectal cancer by combining research findings from the European Prospective Investigation on Diet and Cancer (EPIC) with data underpinning their mechanisms of action, for example, the importance of DNA damage and endogenous nitroso compound formation, from metabolic studies.

Sheila was also a leader in biomarker discovery, from assessment of nutritional status and development of independent markers of nutrient intake (given the limitations of dietary assessment techniques) to biomarkers of cancer risk. More recently, her pioneering work had moved towards understanding the relative importance of diet–gene interactions on health and disease.

Sheila was Director of the MRC Centre for Nutritional Epidemiology in Cancer Prevention and Survival at the University of Cambridge and one of the founding members of the EPIC prospective investigation of diet and cancer. Her contributions to research were recognised by numerous prizes and awards, and she was elected a Fellow of the Academy of Science in 2001 for her work on biomarkers. She was an Honorary Professor at both the University of Cambridge and University of Ulster, and just weeks before she died was awarded an OBE for services to healthcare.

Sheila was passionate about improving public health and nutrition and was an independent expert on the government's Committee on Medical Aspects of Food, later known as the Food Standards Agency Scientific Committee on Nutrition. She skilfully combined her busy career and international success with a happy home life, and was a wonderful cook who frequently entertained her extended family, colleagues and friends.

Few things pleased Sheila more than mentoring young scientists, and over the course of her career she trained many PhD students and postdoctoral fellows. Sheila was an inspirational leader and her research will continue to have an impact for many more years. Her commitment, enthusiasm and passion for nutrition will not be forgotten and her early death when she had so much still to contribute to the field is a great loss to us all.

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